
19 Glory in Defeat and Other Islamist Ideologies

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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND¹

Other than a number of rapidly developing city-states in the Persian Gulf, today's Islamic countries of the Middle East are barely a shadow of what they once were. As the fruits of the Renaissance and Reformation ripened, the Christian West began outdistancing the Moslem East. The Industrial Revolution, leading to scientific advancements and financial strength, gave greater impetus to opening the world to Western exploration and also exploitation. The colonial age had now begun and the retreat of the Moslems became the inevitable sign of the latter's reversal of fortune. One side had failed to keep pace with change; the other was now dictating that change.

In the Far East, the disparity was no less stark. However, a number of countries there made a planned and directed effort to compensate for their lag, eventually breaking through their underdevelopment. By the early twentieth century, Japan, a small island country, emerged as a great power, vanquishing colossal Russia in the 1905 Russo-Japanese War. The road to success had been charted, and Japan's neighbors would take on the challenge of emulating its efforts. Thus, despite the experiences of a colonial heritage or war, states like Taiwan, Singapore, and South Korea overcame major obstacles to become Asia's leading industrial states. Similarly, energy-dependent and highly populated China and India, with recent and long histories of harsh colonial rules, continued to push ahead as though driven by their ancient legacies of great civilizations.

By the turn of the twenty-first century, after monumental sacrifices in human life and liberty, China became a world economic power. India, somewhat less successful on the economic front, claimed the title of world's largest democracy, with equally consequential sociopolitical reforms and scientific achievements. In comparison to the above newly developed countries, however, the Middle East has not fared well, despite benefiting from relatively small populations and abundant natural resources.²

But this inability to modernize and establish functioning civil societies was not due to a less impressive historical past; nor had they always lagged behind the Far East. For example, up until the mid-nineteenth century, Egypt was not far behind the now highly

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advanced Japan. Paradoxically, of all the major countries in the Middle East, only oil-less Turkey, with a younger history than many of its neighbors, is making solid strides toward full democracy and overcoming underdevelopment. What it lacks in oil and gas is compensated for by a nationalistic state that has, since the early 1920s, consistently and, when needed, by authoritarian measures, pursued secular law and modernization.³

In much of the Islamic world, rather than study the above countries' success stories as blueprints for advancement, introversion has taken place. The 1979 revolution in Iran ushered a widespread rejectionist philosophy changing the Moslems' views of themselves and their position in the world, as well as their approaches to daily life and politics. In modern times, anti-Western feelings in the Middle East have been traceable to the effects of European colonization and the colonizers' heavy-handed approaches toward their colonies. More recently, the seeds of public dissent were sown and the grounds for rejecting Western ways were plowed by an American regional presence, which the masses viewed as benefiting only Washington and its conservative local allies, Israel in particular. Those who saw their solution in changing the status quo by staging mass uprisings, revolution, and a return to sharia law now felt increasingly victimized and discriminated against.

Local frustration and disillusionment also had a domestic component that focused on corrupt and ineffective political leaders who espoused Western ideologies but could neither improve their people's well-being nor succeed in defeating the much smaller state of Israel. However, it was the Islamists' gaining and holding power in Iran, ironically a country that was showing signs of progress, that produced a wake-up call throughout the Moslem world and led to widespread Islamic resurgence. The event provided a blueprint for oppositional and militant action against Westward-leaning regimes, demonstrating the tenacity and effectiveness of Islamist groups. Further, it was testimony to the fact that through unity, determination, blind faith, and readiness to sacrifice lives, powerful and deeply entrenched regimes could be overthrown, and dominant world powers put on the defensive.

Prior to 1979 one would be hard pressed to find terrorists for whom acts of suicide were a common methodology for voicing dissent. Nor were incidents of hostage taking a prevalent approach to intimidation and retribution. The taking of 52 American hostages, sanctioned by Ayatollah Khomeini; his bestowing the title of *Shahedparvar* (those who breed martyrs or suicide warriors) on his followers; and his demanding that they cause "torrents of blood" to flow changed the nature of conflict and the political discourse that had been dominant among dissident Moslems.⁴

New standards were now set, and a new discourse gained currency that targeted the "enemies of Islam" through revolutionary, militant, and martyr-oriented strategies. Life became readily expendable, especially if it hindered the advancement of Islamist agendas. Islam thus became a means and an end for the frustrated masses, giving rise to leaders who spoke in terms of Islamic communities (*ummat*), and pushed the need to restore Islam to its former position of power by removing the corrupting Western influences that hindered the promotion of their own millenarian beliefs.

Previously, the angry masses and their nonstate leaders did not know how to channel their frustrations or where to direct their grievances. In the post-1979 period, rather than

directing their explosive energies at laying the groundwork for creating institutions through which national grievances and shortcomings could be addressed, or building peaceful and constructive channels of communication, an opposite approach was adopted that promoted conflict and extremism. Thus, the ideas that emanated from Iran encouraged the Moslem masses toward action, while alarming their political leaders. Time would gradually alter most people's initially positive perception of the 1979 Revolution, but the train that carried extremism and Islamic fundamentalism had now received sufficient jolt to leave the station.

Other than by effectively eliminating their opponents in Iran, the clerics gained considerable credibility in the Islamic world by maintaining a self-righteous stance that resorted to intimidation tactics and belittled the West, all with considerable impunity. The lessons learned were that such tactics are most rewarding because they allow the leadership of smaller states to solidify their rules and broaden their popular support, despite poor performance on other fronts. The key was to appeal, by attacking the United States and its close allies, to people's low self-esteems, their perpetual sense of being wronged, and their desires for recognition. Many grievances against the West were legitimate, but what the new approach entailed was to make it the sole scapegoat for all existing problems.

As proved by leaders like Nasser, Gadhafi, and Castro, words and actions that degraded the West worked wonders for failing regimes. Now, regardless of how hollow, self-damaging, or misguided such policies were, their promotion made sense because they provided people a psychological boost, a sense of being avenged, and a source on which all their own failures could be blamed. The instructive lesson for the newly emerged Islamist leaders was to keep the stakes high and never retreat from one's goals, except temporarily, and then, only when absolutely necessary. Indeed, if Saddam had played by these rules, he may well have survived.

Iraq and Afghanistan (where the United States has failed to establish order) have only served to strengthen the perception that the only weapon against which the West is vulnerable is true Islam. Thus, Ayatollah Khomeini's repeated declaration that "America cannot do a damned thing" continues to ring true, despite the allied invasion of Iraq, which resulted in the unintended outcome of strengthening the Islamists. At the very least, Iran's clerics demonstrated that, with a degree of shrewdness, the red line that might trigger a severe U.S. response was much further into the horizon than previously believed. Playing the game of intimidation, softened by occasional words of conciliation, and supplemented by cleverly breathing discord among the great powers, has worked wonders in keeping their enemies confused and off balance.

Finally, Islamists have been emboldened by the retreat of the American armada from Lebanon after the annihilation of the Marines' barrack in Beirut by suicide bombers (1983), the 1989 victory of the primitively armed Afghani mujahideen against the former Soviet Union, Palestinian successes against the Israelis during their intifada uprisings from 1987 to 1993 and again in 2000–2006, Hezbollah's ability to emerge unscathed after a strong 2006 Israeli military campaign to uproot it from southern Lebanon, the stunning 2006 victory in the first Palestinian parliamentary elections by Islamic resistance movement Hamas, and the West's continued inability to prevent Tehran from

pushing forward with its nuclear objective. These developments have provided fuel for resurgent Islam and convinced the Islamists that fighting rather than compromising better serves their cause.

REDEFINING ONE'S EARTHLY PROBLEMS

Due to the noteworthy successes that anti-Western and Islamist groups have scored in the past decades, and the continued hardship and disillusionment of the masses in the Middle East, key questions that focus on why Islamic states have failed to keep pace, or why their modern armies repeatedly lost to Israel, have been replaced by questions that project blame on others, particularly on the West. By asking such increasingly popular but rhetorical questions as, How can Moslems stand tall and overcome their problems as long as they resort to Western ideologies and rely on their methodologies? people have effectively rejected socialism, modernism, secularism, and nationalism, which were supposed to have improved their conditions.⁵ Since the West is viewed as selfishly pursuing its old colonial or imperialistic agendas, it stands to reason that its ideologies cannot serve others. Needless to say, the U.S. military involvement in Iraq has had a devastating effect on this already-negative perception. Importantly, for the Moslems, what gives immense credibility to rejectionist views of the West is that these views can also be supported by old text. Islamists have made effective use of established religious writings where Christians and Jews were treated as “the West,” and “Westernization” as “an insidious scheme to undermine Islam.”⁶

Adding complexity to an already complex and negative view of the world are the powerful conspiratorial beliefs that maintain that nothing of substance happens unless supported by Washington, London, and the oil cartels, or backed by powerful lobbies and kingmakers in the West. These perspectives have become increasingly dominant among Moslems today. Consequently, the religion has sidestepped any self-reflection of core values and behaviors to find shortcomings. Under rare incidents when fundamentalists do internalize blame, it is at the politically nonpartisan oppressed masses that they direct it, for their failure to rise up, and “for their weakness in following the oppressor.”⁷ Aya-tollah Khomeini often admonished his followers that blame goes to those who do nothing to uproot injustice by opposing the oppressor (*mostakbar*). But if neither Western ideology nor methodology has answers to the Moslems' laggard position in the world, what alternatives might they pursue?

Resurgent Islam, which proposes to remedy this situation, has forced not only pro-Western but also anti-American and secular regimes of the Middle East to modify their behaviors. The increased need to adopt Islamic characteristics or promote an Islamic facade is best exemplified by the Baathist Saddam Hussein's modification of the Iraqi flag during the Iran-Iraq war by decorating it with the words *Allah o akbar* (God is great).⁸ Similarly, to improve his legitimacy, the secular Baathist Hafiz al-Assad of Syria asked Iranian clerics to confirm the Islamic (Shiite) nature of his Alawi regime. Further, Egypt's secular regime has allowed the Muslim Brotherhood to participate in politics again.⁹

The answers and conclusions that are propagated in the Middle East mostly support the notion that the difficulties Islamic states face cannot be resolved outside of an Islamic

framework. In other words, the problems have stemmed from the fact that political leaders in the Middle East have abandoned Islam, and that it is time to adopt “The Islamic Solution” (*Hal al-Islami*).¹⁰ Given that Islam encompasses all aspects of life (religious as well as sociopolitical and economic), it has not been difficult to see it as providing answers to all mankind’s problems. Not surprisingly, this has meant looking to the distant past to find solutions for the present. However, this past, which is focused on Islam’s days of glory or great piety, seems less interested in a future that guarantees independent thought, social liberty, modernity, and economic remuneration in this world. Rather, it primarily assures the true believer of spiritual salvation and an eternally joyful existence in the world beyond. Any steps that may contradict Islamic law (*sharia*) may not be pursued, even if it benefits the country—and, by that definition, those who live in it.

Consequently, where other developing countries advanced by overcoming such standard problems as lack of resources, deplorable economic and industrial infrastructure, untrained labor, poor medical care, illiteracy, corruption, nepotism, foreign intervention, and a colonial legacy, the Middle East staggers. Having returned to religious dogma, socioeconomic development and ecological goals have lost their urgency. As Ayatollah Khomeini reminded Iranians, “Economics is for donkeys [idiots]”¹¹ and “Revolution was not about the price of watermelons.”¹² Moreover, citizenry (*mellat*) is subjugated to the Islamic community (*ummat*), and notions of a cultural or national identity that reference a pre-Islamic past are opposed and systematically erased, unless the regime is secular.

Not only have issues relating to national identity and socioeconomic problems been redefined but so have concepts of war and peace. Fundamentalists maintain that peace will come when the enemies of Islam have been routed, and conflict will not cease until this goal is achieved. However, the notion of war within a religious context (*jihad*) differs from regular warfare. The former is more nuanced and is not limited to the battlefield; nor does it have to be fought by standard rules, methods, or arms.

Given the disparity of power between East and West, martyrdom, propaganda, deception, and imagery have become key components in Islamists’ arsenals; and there is substantial and detailed literature going back to Islam’s early period that elaborates the use of such tactics. Presently, the war is cast in religious terms, where David and Goliath are evoked, and true believers are directed into action by being reminded of the unexpected outcome of that confrontation. David had contributed his faith, devotion, courage, and selflessness, just as Moslems are called to do; God did, and will do, the rest. In such instances, it is critical that God be seen “as a personal participant in the fighting process.” It is God that grants victory so that “truth” may “nullify falsehood.” Similarly, when Moslems won in the Battle of Badr,¹³ the Qur’an states, “It was not you who slew them, but Allah. . . .”¹⁴

Many of the references to *jihad* in the Qur’an were aimed at encouraging those who were reluctant to fight, reminding them that God is fighting along their side, and of the “fantastic rewards” to be given to those who fight. There is a considerable body of literature dealing with the rewards and the high status reserved for martyrs.¹⁵ But in the end, the choice is not for the Moslems to make. To have submitted to God means trusting

Him, or facing devastating consequences. Islamic holy texts allocate considerable space to punishment and the need to fear God. As the Qur'an reminds Moslems,

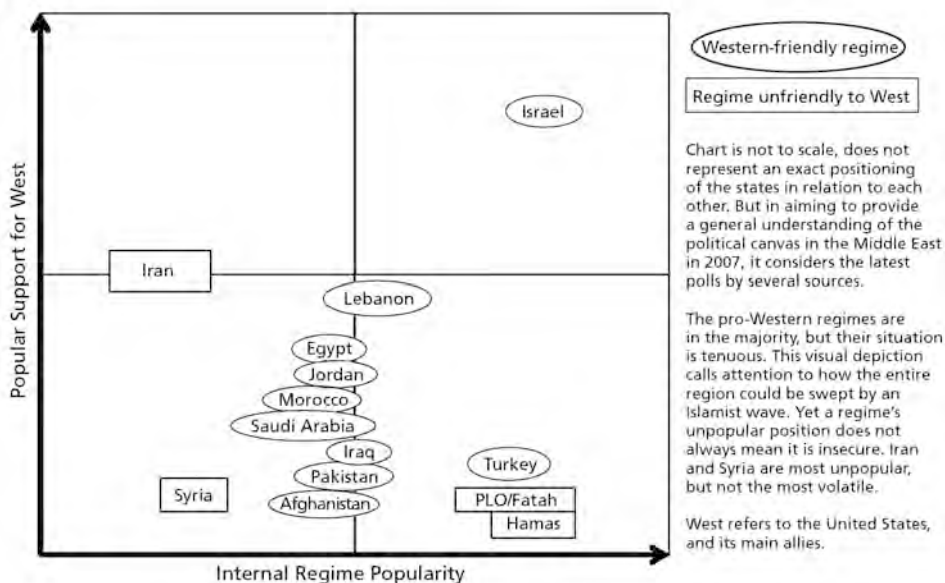
Fighting is prescribed for you, and ye dislike it. But it is possible that ye dislike a thing which is good for you. And that ye love a thing which is bad for you. But God knoweth, and ye know not.¹⁶

SECTARIAN IDEOLOGIES AND CALLS TO ACTION

Sunni and Shiite views and perspectives about the problems Moslems face, and the ideologies Sunnis and Shiites resort to for resolving them, are often dissimilar. They may cooperate for convenience, but beyond subduing common enemies, their goals and aspirations are not the same. Nor does each sect enjoy full harmony with all its subgroups. Hence, in their lineup to confront their problems, Sunnis generally reach out to Sunnis, and Shiites to Shiites.¹⁷ Six main divisions are readily distinguishable in the Middle East:

1. The Sunni populations of the region. By and large, they oppose the United States, are unsupportive of their own Westward-leaning regimes, and harbor deep resentment toward Israel and the Shiites, and most support the ideas of resurgent Sunni Islam.¹⁸

2. The non-Iranian Shiites. Except for those in Iraq and Bahrain, they live under Sunni rule and resent their more numerous coreligionists. They are favorable toward Iran's clerical regime, harbor negative sentiments toward the United States and its allies,¹⁹ and aim to strengthen their positions by bridging the territorial gaps that separate them. Many Sunnis feel threatened by them, especially where much of their oil fields are in Shiite lands.



Middle East political canvas²⁰

3. The non-Arab Shiite Iranians. Most treat religion from a practical perspective. The Arab-Israeli conflict is not of primary concern to them; most do not harbor deep anti-American sentiments but oppose their own regime.²¹

4. Pro-Western Sunni regimes. They mostly adhere to sharia law, but remain threatened by Islamic extremists who oppose the West, and any entity that befriends it. They oppose Israel without openly confronting it, and harbor much animosity toward Shiites.²²

5. Iran's Islamic Republic. This is a revolutionary and fundamentalist Shiite state that sees the United States, Israel, and Western culture as its primary foes. It supports Syria and promotes any extremist group that opposes U.S. regional presence and its allies.

6. The Baathist regime of Syria. This Alawi (a Shiite offshoot) regime rules over a Sunni majority, opposes America, and is a major opponent of Israel. It supports Iran, but is itself a secular regime that fears its own Sunni population. Therefore, it is supportive of the Shiites in Lebanon, while feeling threatened by Islamists who shun secular government and demand a return to strict sharia law.²³

THE GOLDEN AGE OF ISLAM

In recent times, political reference to a vague and idealized period known as “the Golden Age of Islam” has become frequent. This utopian perception is a highly idealized rendition of a period that some equate with the Abbasid caliphate (750–1258),²⁴ when the Islamic empire reached its peak, covering territories that stretched over three continents. Some Islamists showcase this bygone era and make its reestablishment an objective. But they maintain that succeeding in this goal requires an Islamic revival, the rejection of Western ways and influences, and the ejection of the West and its allies from Islamic lands.²⁵ In essence, meeting these prerequisites has become the Islamists' main focus.

However, the importance of Islam's “Golden Age” is primarily for the Sunnis and more so for Sunni Arabs, because it symbolizes the height of Islam's grandeur when they brought vast territories under their rule. By drawing from and combining the ancient knowledge of Greece, Persia, and India, they promoted the spread of sciences and general learning.²⁶ Thus, this revered period provides a sense of identity, unity, and achievement, while assuring them a place in the world. Indeed, most people and cultures have some type of a golden age that for them remains highly idealized and unassailable.²⁷

There are others who associate Islam's “Golden Age” with its first 40 years of history (621–661), which includes the leadership of its first four caliphs, known as the “Rightly Guided.” It was during this period that Islam established itself as a major religion, made large conquests, and is believed to have remained in its purest form, largely untouched by alien thoughts or widespread dissent. Those who stress this period maintain that the problems Moslems now face are due to their divergence from Islam's true path and their internal disagreements over progress. If only Moslems resumed their original ways, became pious again, and rejected corrupting foreign thoughts, the doors that have been shut to them would reopen, and their desired conditions be reestablished.

Finally, the idea of a golden age has also been equated with notable individuals, groups, or events. This type of focus is more descriptive of the Shiites, who, unlike the Sunnis, were not often in dominant positions, and lack the historical memory of a large empire,²⁸ centrally ruled by a caliph. Consequently, they looked to other sources of identity, legitimacy, and inspiration to anchor themselves. Since the grandeur of the Islamic empire had come at the cost of other cultures and empires, not all people in the Middle East have identified with the same period or harbored identical feelings toward it. Indeed, nowhere is the concept of Islam's "Golden Age" in greater conflict than among Iranians, possessing their own pre-Islamic identity and geopolitical references.

This old conflict stems from two opposing views: one looking to Iran (Persia) with its ancient, pre-Islamic days of imperial glory and civilization, the other cherishing the country's post-Islamic period with its own periods of conquest and achievement, albeit at a fraction of what it once was. In 1501, particularly, the Safavid dynasty succeeded in reunifying Iran under Shiism, where it had remained fragmented since its fall to Moslem armies after 642. The present disconnect between Iranian state and society, or the old conflict between Iranian nationalists and clergy, stems from these opposing points of reference. While the latter have worked hard to erase all historical memory of a distinctly Iranian entity nourished by its ancient past, the former have tried to preserve it.²⁹ Thus, for centuries, proponents of Shiism like Ali Shariati (an Iranian Marxist-Islamist theoretician), have argued,

Islamic civilization has worked like scissors and has cut us off completely from our pre-Islamic past. . . . Our people remember nothing from this distant past and do not care to learn about the pre-Islamic civilizations. . . . Consequently, for us a return to our roots means not a rediscovery of pre-Islamic Iran, but a return to our Islamic, especially Shiah roots.³⁰

SUNNI AND SHIITE FOUNDATIONS

The difference between the Sunni and Shiite fundamentalist positions is also of interest. The Sunnis are galvanizing around the idea of reclaiming their lost power and prestige, the Shiites around the notion of reestablishing just and legitimate rule, usurped by the Sunnis. Justice will be served when the reins of power are turned over to leading Shiites, awaiting the return of Mohammad al-Mahdi, the Hidden Twelfth Imam (also known as the Mahdi), who is said to have gone into occultation in the year 874.³¹

Except for Iranian Shiites, who have not been the religious underdogs for over five centuries, and the Shiites living in Lebanon, who view Israel as their primary enemy, other Shiites have traditionally viewed the Sunnis as their main foe. Since the Iranian Revolution, however, the United States and Israel are viewed with at least as much disdain among Shiites as are the Sunnis. This anti-Western sentiment and desire to undo the region's pro-Western regimes are two broad objectives over which the Islamists, disillusioned Moslems, and Tehran find common ground. In this endeavor, jihadist ideology and martyrdom, supported by a strong psychological component, disseminated through different channels of communication, have become the Islamists' weapons of choice.

Sunni Islamists are primarily informed by *Wahhabi*³² and *Salafi*³³ ideologies with jihadi overtones. *Jihad* originally referred to defensive wars, allowing the newly Moslem

converts to resist their more powerful internal enemies. But as Islam grew in strength, “the doctrine came to mean the existence of one single Islamic state, ruling the entire umma.”³⁴ However, through the centuries, Sunnis (and Shiites to a much smaller degree) have used the term as both defensive and offensive to thwart their adversaries. Indeed, the interpretation has often been a matter of convenience. For example, a popular argument now maintains that evicting the enemies of Islam from Moslem lands is a defensive act.

Irrespective of this debate, jihadist ideology has been the ready-made vehicle with which to oppose the West. Both Sunni and Shiite sects resort to it, but other than differing goals and perceptions, there is also a technical difference that distinguishes them. This pertains to the fact that for Shiites, jihad may only be waged under the leadership of a rightful imam.³⁵ That a large majority of terrorist acts outside of the Middle East have been conducted by Sunnis may be partially explained by this.

For the Shiites, what best captures their soul and unifies them for action is a historical event known as the “Battle of Karbala’,” fought in the year 680. It is there that their third imam (Hussein ibn Ali) and his clan of 71 are believed to have been brutally massacred by Yazid’s much larger forces.³⁶ The conflict arose after Ali (the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, the fourth and last of the “Rightly Guided” caliphs, and the first Shiite imam) died of a stab wound in 661. His partisans (the Shiites) had always maintained that he, rather than the other three caliphs, should have ruled after Muhammad’s death. After Ali, his older son, Hassan, conceded the leadership of the Islamic community to Yazid, but Hassan’s younger brother Hussein did not. This conflict eventually played itself out on the plains of Karbala’, resulting in Hussein’s death, which created such an unbridgeable chasm between the Shiites and Sunnis that not even the passage of 13 centuries has been able to bridge it.

The importance of this episode for militant Shiites and jihadists is the ideological foundation it provides for opposing what Shiite leaders identify as illegal or unjust. It serves as a call to action, and gives strong encouragement to those who lack sufficient hope or courage to fight more powerful enemies. Hussein’s martyrdom at Karbala’ was made into an epic story to mentally prepare the Shiites for war and help them view their defeats as only temporary setbacks. To Shiite clerics and their true believers who resort to their own sources of legitimacy and moments of historical pride, hereditary rule and leadership over the Islamic community must remain with the Prophet’s household, i.e., Ali and his male descents, all of whom are considered to be immaculate and divine.

According to Shiites, Muhammad had told Ali that he was next in line as the chosen one to lead the Moslems. To confirm this, Ali and his descendents are often quoted as stating that the Prophet entrusted Islam’s leadership to them. For example, according to Ja’far as-Sadiq (the sixth imam), Ali had recounted the following story about the time when God ordered the Prophet to appoint a successor. The Apostle of God asked: “Who? O Lord.” And He replied: “Appoint your cousin [Ali]. . . .” Similarly, the eighth imam (Reza) is quoted as saying the Prophet had personally told Ali: “You and the Imam from among your descendents, O Ali, are the Proof of God to his creation after me. . . . For you are of me, you are created of my substance, and I am of you.”³⁷

Given the Shiites' belief that the leadership positions of Ali's descendants had been usurped by Sunni caliphs, the classical Shiite approach to politics became one that focused on reestablishing "just" and "legitimate" rule by reinstating the Prophets' household. After the disappearance of the Twelfth Imam, the issue became maintaining a robust Shiite community with its saints and leading clerics, many of whom also claimed descent from the Prophet.

To achieve this goal during a period of Sunni supremacy, a variety of religiously sanctioned techniques were perfected that were based on the notion that ends justify the means. The more important and effective of these were *kbod'eb*, known as denial and misrepresentation; *tanfieb*, best described as pretense; and *taqiyab*, or dissimulation that translates into concealing the truth.³⁸ These techniques, which had their roots in early Islam, were practiced as weapons of the weak against the strong. They proved so successful as to slowly enter mainstream politics. On rare occasions, the option of resorting to acts of martyrdom, rather than accepting what religious leaders identified as illegitimate rule, was also exercised.

It was mostly the uncompromising and militant approach among these options that Khomeini emphasized in order to bring the clerics to power. However, it is important to note that this view differs from classical Sunni doctrine, which maintains that life under tyranny and hardship is still preferential to haphazard rule and chaos. In other words, the Shiites' view was more revolutionary and demanding of change, while the Sunnis' was more conformist and accepting of the status quo.

The Shiites' traditional understanding of and approach to the Battle of Karbala' was one that viewed Imam Hussein and his clan as the disinherited (*mazloom*). The image associated with this depiction conjured immense sympathy among the masses, and great empathy from those who felt they too had been wronged in life. From this angle, Hussein was projected as a passive saint who was massacred while defending his beliefs and his clan. Thus, his passive actions of neither renouncing his claim to leadership nor taking flight are what ultimately led to his martyrdom. For centuries, in an effort to relive Karbala' and remind people what occurred there, play acts known as *Ta'zieh* have been staged during the two holy days of *Tassua* and *Ashura*, in the month of Muharram. Large crowds gather on open street corners to watch the entire battle scene, culminating in the beheading of Imam Hussein by his Sunni enemies, all played out by armature actors.

Although Hussein's forces were too few to have presented a viable resistance against Yazid, the battle he waged at Karbala was never depicted as being in vain. The imam had been defeated, but the ultimate glory was his. Through his intransigence and martyrdom, Hussein showed his followers the way to salvation. He also proved to his enemies that the Shiites would not give in to unjust and illegitimate rule. However, this traditional depiction did not introduce Hussein as a proactive leader, or a warrior who actively sought war with his enemies in order to ensure justice was established.

Although the political nature of Shiism has made it into a powerful tool for stirring up emotions and provoking militant action, Hussein's generally reactive image proved lacking to Iran's revolutionary Islamists who needed a more potent force to galvanize the masses against the Shah. Through delicate manipulation, they redefined Hussein's true

personality and objectives, thereby extracting important additional benefits from the events in Karbala’.

This was achieved by reintroducing Hussein, but not as a passive leader who was victimized, or whose martyrdom should evoke a sense of defeat and deep grief. Nor was his massacre to be viewed as a tragedy that was forced upon him. On the contrary, the glory of the war he waged, and his willingness to be martyred were to be emphasized and idealized as a moment of glory in Shiite history. Karbala’ was depicted as Hussein’s conscious decision to wage war on his larger enemy, knowing full well what the earthly outcome would be. Indeed, it was not the immediate earthly outcome that mattered most.

GLORY IN DEFEAT

This newly modified approach to militant Islamic philosophy was first successfully used to overthrow the Shah, who was depicted as Yazid, and Ayatollah Khomeini as the embodiment of Imam Hussein, or, some argued, the Mahdi himself. Much the same approach was used in the Iran-Iraq war to delegitimize Saddam Hussein and his Baathist regime. Similarly to the Shah, Saddam was cast as an “infidel,” and his rule as “unjust.” Equally bold and imaginative was the way in which the Iraq war was equated with Karbala’, and the dead Iranian soldiers with its martyrs. In recruiting and ensuring ongoing public support for the war, people were told to marvel at Imam Hussein’s accomplishment and imitate his way with great joy and pride.

Families that had lost their sons to war were told to rejoice, because their fallen soldiers of Islam had now entered heaven. Many families of martyrs were congratulated by officials from the regime, given pastries and sweets, and told to celebrate. Imam Hussein had shown the way to salvation and, by his death, promoted the cult of saints and martyrdom among Shiites. By following his example, this imaginative ideology argued, truth would prevail over falsehood, and justice would be reestablished under true Islam.³⁹

The Shiite theory of “just war” is nuanced and dynamic, and goes beyond Sunni interpretations. The idea of a golden age as a sought-after period that once existed under the Abbasids is absent here, but it is matched by the idea of a golden age that awaits mankind after the return of the Hidden Imam. This will happen when the world is filled with corruption and injustice, a situation that his arrival is to remedy. Until then, the Islamic community must reject illegitimate rulers and unjust conditions, as prescribed by its leading ayatollahs.⁴⁰ Today, the views of Shiite and Sunni masses are mostly aligned in equating falsehood, injustice, and illegitimate rule with the presence and influence of the United States, its allies, and surrogate regimes. Be it in the Middle East, or on the global scene, or at the UN, they are perceived as a primary source of evil that must be defeated, or forced to retreat.

Shiism is the more politicized of Islam’s two main sects, since its ayatollahs possess considerable influence over their followers. Their ability to legally interpret the holy texts, provide their own explanations for different circumstances, and call their followers to action gives them an important edge over their Sunni counterparts. This local and regional power they presently enjoy is the result of the Iranian Revolution, which caused a watershed in Islam’s history of leadership. “Throughout all periods of Islamic history the *‘ulama* [leading theologians and clerics] were politically and economically subservient

to political rulers.”⁴¹ The events in Iran would change all that, giving them unparalleled access to wealth and power.

The grand ayatollahs may now assume the title of regents to the Hidden Imam, act as a source of emulation, and pass judgment on all earthly matters. The pillars of the Islamic republic rest on a concept known as *velayat-e faghib* (or the leadership of the jurisprudence), first successfully articulated and implemented by Ayatollah Khomeini. It holds that pending the return of the Twelfth Imam (on Judgment Day), the custodianship of the state and the Islamic community rests with the leading grand ayatollah. In relation to this, some Shiites believe that the Hidden Imam’s return must be hastened, while others are of the opinion that it should be left to follow its own preordained course. Clearly, the former position, which Iran’s current president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad supports, entails an apocalyptic view of the world, with all the requirements and implications that accompany its realization.

A question arises here as to how Shiite clerics were able to convince the masses of the accuracy of their bold religious interpretation. It helps to remember that almost all senior ayatollahs claim descent from the Prophet, a unique status that gives their claim to leadership a degree of legitimacy. Moreover, in the eyes of Moslems, Muhammad “was not only the transmitter of the Qur’an to mankind at large but also its primary recipient: certain aspects of its meaning were reserved for him alone.”⁴² According to the Sunnis, Allah did not grant this privilege to anyone else. But to the Twelver Shiites, this unique power was passed on to Ali by the Prophet,⁴³ and Ali passed it down to his infallible sons, until the line ended with the Mahdi. But since the Mahdi is in occultation, the clerics have argued, only the most devout and learned of the faithful can discover or unveil (*kashf*) the deeper meanings embedded in the Qur’an. This is a domain in which the Sunni clergy have not dared tread. This may provide an explanation as to why non-clerical figures like Bin Laden can spearhead a jihadist movement among the Sunnis, but the Shiites are prone to look to the likes of Ayatollah Khomeini before rising up.

SUMMARY

The ideologies that propel jihadist movements are different. Yet some of the core beliefs among Islamists are similar, although they are not easily harmonized. A key element in all this is the notion of a cosmic war that should not be seen as lost due to “temporary setbacks.” Therefore:

1. It is the Moslems’ duty to fight “infidels” and all foreign intrusion. Although war should not take place among Muhammad’s followers, the term “infidel” has been applied to Moslems as well. The issue here is one of designation and promotion by a figure of authority.
2. Moslems should propagate Islam and expand its influence. Although both the Sunnis and Shiites pursue this objective, their end goals are different. Hence, other than cooperating to eliminate common enemies, they do not combine forces.
3. Moslems should be ready to give their lives in the way of Allah. Thus, Islamists aim to convince their followers of the great benefits in achieving martyrdom. These benefits, depicted as both spiritual and physical, take up considerable space in

Islamic literature, as does the topic of jihad. Both sects promote martyrdom, but the Shiites' perspective is more political and better developed.

In the final analysis, the most prudent approach to facing Islamic extremism is to understand what it means and entails, followed by actions that demonstrate to its leaders and proponents that their "setbacks" are not temporary. Equally important is establishing lines of communications with Moslems, making them aware of the harmful effects and self-defeating policies of their militant or revolutionary leaders.

NOTES

1. The focus of this paper is on Islamists or (militant) fundamentalists who espouse extremist views and promote violence. This article, which is written with nonspecialists in mind, does not suggest that all Moslems are extremists, but it does contend that the fundamentalist strain in Islam has been penetrating mainstream Moslem societies at an accelerated rate, particularly since the Iranian Revolution and the current conflict in Iraq. Where the words "fundamentalist" or "revivalist" appear, the reference is to extremist and militant Islam. Otherwise, both terms can be used without the same negative connotations. While most of the literature dealing with Islam and terrorism is focused on the Sunnis, this article allocates equal attention to the Shiites.
2. For an overview and general discussion on how and why some states have broken through underdevelopment but not others, see Lawrence E. Harrison and Samuel P. Huntington, *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), xiii–xvi and 2–13.
3. A comparison between Turkey and Iran is instructive. Turkey's revenue from tourism alone is now about one-third of Iran's from oil. And with comparable populations, but despite great increase in Iran's revenues due to higher oil prices, Turkey's 2006 gross domestic product and gross domestic product per capita were about twice those of Iran. Only three decades earlier, the reverse of this situation was true.
4. Iran's extensive use of children in its war with Iraq was also a new development, where boys 12 and younger died by marching over Iraqi minefields. Similar tactics were later applied in the Palestinian Intifada, where suicide bombers included youngsters.
5. Bassem Tibi, "The Renewed Role of Islam in the Political and Social Development of the Middle East," *The Middle East Journal* 37, no. 1 (1983): 4–9.
6. Yazbeck Yvonne Haddad, "The Qur'anic Justification for an Islamic Revolution: The View of Sayyid Qutb," *The Middle East Journal* 37, no. 1 (Winter 1983): 24.
7. *Ibid.*, 22–23.
8. Some believe Saddam altered the flag during the U.S. Gulf War, but this occurred before. See BBC News, "Iraqis Unimpressed by Flag Design," 27 April 2004, news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/3663387.stm; also see SourceWatch, "New Iraqi Flag," www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=New_Iraqi_flag.
9. The current anti-Western approach is not solely the product of the clerics' negative promotions. Since the early 1950s, Middle Eastern leaders of all stripes have promoted and benefited from a paranoid perception that equates strong leadership and legitimacy with the degree to which those in high public office firmly and fearlessly stand up to the West and challenge it. That this often confrontational approach may also prove very harmful to their countries' interests has been treated as unimportant or irrelevant.
10. Tibi, "The Renewed Role of Islam in the Political and Social Development of the Middle East," 5.
11. Amir Taheri, "Preparing for War and Heading towards an Economic Crisis," *Asbarg Alawsat*, 11 May 2007, www.aawsat.com/english/news.asp?section=2&id=8916.
12. Daniel Byman, Shahram Chubin, Anoushiravan Ehteshami, and Jerrold Green, *Iran's Security Policy in the Post-revolutionary Era* (National Defense Research Institute, Rand, 2001), 16.

13. The Battle of Badr (624) was Muhammad's first military victory. The defeat of his Meccan enemies strengthened the prestige and position of the Moslems in Medina, and made them into a viable force in Arabia.
14. David Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 18.
15. Ibid.
16. Qur'an, 2:216 (Sura of the Cow).
17. The following groups focus on Islam as a way to advance their causes, but not with equal militancy: *al-Qaeda* (the Base) and *al-Haraka al-Islamiya al-Islamiya* (Islamic Reform Movement) of Saudi Arabia; *Jamaat al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad* (Society of Unity of God and Jihad) of Jordan, Iraq, and Afghanistan; *Hiżbe-e Wabdat* (Party of Unity) of Afghanistan; *Jamaat-e Islami* (Islamic Party) and *Tabrik-e Jafariya* (Shia Movement) of Pakistan; *al-Da'wa* (the Islamic Call) of Iraq; *al-Wifaq* (the Accord) of Bahrain; the *Amal* (Hope) created by Lebanese clerics of Iranian origin and *Hezbollah* (Party of God) of Lebanon but supported by Iran; *Hamas* of Palestine (also supported by Iran); the *Badr Brigade* (now *Corp*) of Iraq, which was created and is supported by Iran; the *Mahdi Army* of Iraq (headed by Muqtada al-Sadr); the *Ikhwan al-Muslimin* (Muslim Brotherhood) of Egypt; and the *Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq* (SCIRI) supported by Iran. In Iran, the main groups with external influence include *Hezbollah* (Party of God), the *Pasdaran* (Revolutionary Guards), the *Basijees* (a large militant vigilante group supported and promoted by the regime), and the *Entehari* (the Suicide Army). There are also smaller groups in Iran that focus on internal issues, namely, the *Haqqani Circle* (an ultraconservative group that rejects individuals' rights and popular sovereignty) and *Ansar-e Islam* (made up of reactionary vigilantes whose mission is to enforce Islamic social codes). These groups ensure the regime's survival.
18. The history of the Middle East, covering the colonial period; the Arab-Israeli wars; the direct U.S. involvement in Lebanon, Iraq, and Afghanistan; and U.S. support for Israel, and mostly unpopular pro-Western leaders, are the main reasons for this negative sentiment.
19. Anti-American demonstrations by Shiites are common throughout the Middle East. In Pakistan, large demonstrations took place in March 2000, reported in the March 24 edition of PBS's *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*. In 2006, 4,000 Shiites from the port city of Karachi carried portraits of Ayatollah Khomeini, President Ahmadinejad, and Hassan Nasrallah, to mark al-Quds Day. See "6,000 Pakistani Muslims Hold Anti-Israel Rallies," *Jerusalem Post*, www.jpost.com, 20 October 2006. In April 2006, similar demonstrations occurred among Bahraini Shiites, many of whom display pictures of Ayatollah Khomeini in their homes. See Hassan M. Fattah, "An Island Kingdom Feels the Ripples from Iraq and Iran," *New York Times*, 16 April 2006. In Iraq and Lebanon, the anti-U.S. sentiments propagated by the Mahdi Army and Hezbollah are well known. In Lebanon, only 7 percent of the Shiites are favorable toward the United States compared to 52 percent of the Sunnis. See WorldPublicOpinion.org. In support of Hezbollah, Shiites have demonstrated in Westernized Istanbul. Due to their history and cultural affinities with the West, Iranians are more U.S. friendly and less resentful.
20. For data on the Middle East diagram, see "Global Unease with Major World Powers," The Pew Global Attitude Project, 27 June 2007, www.pewglobal.org; WorldPublicOpinion.org, "Iranians and Americans Believe Islam and the West Can Find Common Ground." Different polls do not fully support each other. Still, in having a favorable view of Americans, Iran received the highest marks after Israel and the Christian Lebanese. Turkey, the Palestinian territories, Pakistan, and Morocco received the lowest marks in terms of having a positive view of the United States and Americans. Polls taken in 2006–2007 showed the following levels of positive views toward the United States: Egypt (21 percent), Iran (22 percent), Israel (78 percent), Jordan (20 percent), Lebanon (47 percent), Morocco (15 percent), Pakistan (15 percent), Palestine (13 percent), Turkey (9 percent). The following had a favorable view of Americans: Egypt (31 percent), Iran (45 percent), Jordan (36 percent), Lebanon (69 percent), Morocco (25 percent), Pakistan (19 percent), Palestine (21 percent), and Turkey (13 percent). Most reports suggest a more favorable view of Americans by Iranians.
21. There are numerous reports of positive American encounters with Iranians inside Iran. For example, see Nicholas D. Kristof, "Those Friendly Iranians," *New York Times*, 5 May 2004; also see Ali G. Scotten,

- “Iranians’ Love Affair with America,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 19 January 2007. Christian Amanpoor of CNN has also indicated that in her experience, Iranians’ feelings toward Americans have been positive (reported on 24 September 2007, in relation to Ahamadinejad’s visit to Columbia University). However, recent polls indicate a less favorable Iranian perspective. See “Iranians and Americans Believe Islam and the West Can Find Common Ground,” published by WorldPublicOpinion.org, 30 January 2007, www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/home_page/312.php?nid=&id=&pnt=312&lb=hmpg2. Although events in Iraq have caused a growing disillusionment among Iranians, official polling in Iran is complex and not fully representative.
22. For Saudi Arabia, the following information is noteworthy: a poll showed that while “only 4.9% supported a bin Laden Presidency, 48.7% had a positive opinion of his rhetoric.” See Nawaf Obaid, “An Unprecedented Poll of Saudi Opinion: Yes to Bin Laden; No to Al Qaeda Violence,” *International Herald Tribune*, 28 June 2004. Also, 24 percent of Saudis (most probably the Shiites) express a positive view of Iran. “Global Poll: Iran Seen Playing Negative Role,” *Globe Scan*, www.globescan.com/news_archives/bbc06-3/index.html.
 23. Since 2002, polls show substantial decline among those who had a positive view of the United States and Americans. The current conflict in Iraq has been the main reason for this. Although similar negative trends apply to Iran, there are also reports that contradict the negative polls by suggesting Iranians remain mostly U.S. friendly, especially among the young who are Westward looking and oppose the Islamic system their regime has imposed. During Khatami’s presidency, when the negative sentiments toward the regime were well below the present-day level, “the results of a questionnaire completed by 75,000 14 to 29-year-olds” indicated that 54 percent “[did] not approve of the plans and performance of the government.” Also, young people who are in the majority had “limited esteem for the performance of parliament, the judiciary and the police.” “Iranian Youth Disappointed with Khatami Government,” *IranMania.com*, 29 April 2003, www.iranmania.com/News/ArticleView/Default.asp?NewsCode=15313&NewsKind=Current%20Affairs.
 24. The Abbasid caliphate is typically divided into three periods: the early Abbasids (750–929), the middle Abbasids (930–1099), and the late Abbasids (1100–1258). They held different territories during these times, with varying degrees of influence.
 25. It is mostly over these three aims that the Sunnis and Shiites are in agreement. Each sect promotes its own ideal state and ideologies as a replacement for Western values and system of government. It is in achieving this goal that they may selectively cooperate.
 26. Justin Wintle, *The Timeline History of Islam* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2005), 146.
 27. See Stephen Humphreys, “Modern Arab Historians and the Challenge of the Islamic Past,” in *Middle Eastern Lectures*, ed. Martin Kramer, Middle Eastern Lectures 1 (Tel Aviv: The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies at the Tel Aviv University, 1995), 120–21.
 28. Except for notable Shiite dynasties like the Fatimids (910–1171), with their capital city in Cairo, and the Iranian Shiite dynasties of the Buyids (932–1045), Safavids (1501–1736), and Qajars (1795–1925), with capital cities in Shiraz, Esfahan, and Tehran, respectively.
 29. Those residing in Iran cannot voice their opinions in too critical a manner. Even if government officials may be openly questioned, criticizing the theocratic system itself is far riskier. As most of those who have the opportunity to leave Iran do so, and repression allows for no meaningful dissension, at least one poll indicates the regime as gaining ground on the traditional nationalists who identify with Iran before identifying with Islam. See WorldPublicOpinion.org, “Poll of the Iranian Public,” with Search for Common Ground and the U.S. Institute of Peace Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) (16 January 2007).
 30. Ali Shariati, *Bazgasht* [Return] (n.p., 1978), 11–30.
 31. The Hidden Imam is a central figure for the Shiite Twelvers, who dominate Iran. After Muhammad, Ali, and Hussein, no other figure is equally dominant; and, in some ways, he is no less important than others. The entire Shiite ideology, empowering the clerics to lead the Islamic community, is predicated on the idea that the senior ulema are his representatives. Thus, they are empowered by him and by God to lead until his return. Yet information about the Hidden Imam is sketchy. Some claimed he was killed at a young age; others negated his very existence—among them, the man who would be his uncle stated that his brother had no sons.

Various dates have been provided for his age and his occultations. Depending on which of his two disappearances one views as the more important one (since he was never seen again after the first disappearance), dates can vary by several years. His first disappearance, known as the lesser occultation, is said to have occurred when his father died in 874. He is said to have been seven, but others state he was five, depending on which text one uses. His second disappearance, known as the greater occultation, is said to have occurred in 939, but there is no definitive agreement on this date either. See Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 161–65.

32. Wahhabism is a movement whose followers trace themselves to Abdul Wahab, born in the early 1700s. He opposed medieval Islamic superstition and the cult of saints, which is closely associated with Shiism. The focus was the early teachings of the Qur'an and the Hadith. The leader was a supporter of the Saud family that came to power in 1745. The movement's followers were strict practitioners of Islamic law and forbade music, dancing, and other such displays.
33. The *Salafyya* Movement was influenced by Afghani, a nineteenth-century militant Shiite Iranian theologian. The movement's adherents' ideology revolved around revering their ancient ancestors who followed closely along the Prophet's path. They are mostly a clandestine group that has been active in Kuwait since the mid-1970s and in Saudi Arabia since the late 1970s. They believe that since the "Rightly Guided" caliphs who followed Muhammad were all elected, hereditary regimes are not legitimized by Islam. This explains their animosity toward the Shiites. They were among those who attacked Mecca in 1979, but now hold parliamentary seats in Kuwait.
34. Andrew G. Bostom, ed., *The Legacy of Jihad: Islamic Holy War and the Fate of Non-Muslims* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books), 322.
35. *Ibid.*
36. Yazid was the son of Mu'awiyah. The latter was the founder of the Umayyad dynasty (661–750). Yazid succeeded his father as the second caliph of this first Islamic dynasty. The Umayyads eventually lost power to the Abbasids, at which time Islam's capital city was moved from Damascus to Baghdad, bringing the Abbasids under considerable Persian influence.
37. For greater elaboration see Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*, 157–59.
38. Marvin Zonis, *The Majestic Failure* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 269–70. Also see Baqer Moin, *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 56.
39. For a detailed discussion of how Imam Hussein's traditional image was recast by the revolutionary Islamists in Iran, see Hamid Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought* (University of Texas Press, 1982). This is a thorough analysis of Shiite and Sunni responses to the challenges of the twentieth century. The Islamist idea of presenting a more revolutionary image of Imam Hussein was first examined by Salehi Najafabadi's work, entitled *Shaid-e javid* (The eternal martyr), published in Tehran.
40. Since illegitimacy is often in the eyes of the beholder, and Shiites are not the underdogs they once were—at least not in Iran, Iraq, or Lebanon—and power is mostly held by their extremist elements, it is not surprising that the interpretations of such terms have taken unique turns. Thus, Sunni leaders are doubly illegitimate today: first for being Sunnis who rule by decree; second, because they are Western friendly and do not unite to undo Israel.
41. Tibi, "The Renewed Role of Islam in the Political and Social Development of the Middle East," 4. It should be noted, however, that in Iran, since the early Safavid period, the clergy began enjoying a degree of economic independence, due to their custodianship of Shiite shrines, holy sites, and the lands that had been allocated to these. By the Qajar period, the leading clerics had access to considerable independent wealth and were influential enough to be considered a state within a state. However, actual political power still remained in the hands of the ruling monarchs—a situation that the clerics tolerated, but often viewed with contempt.
42. Ruhollah Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*, trans. Hamid Algar (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1981), 430.
43. *Ibid.*, 394.